

## Media Research and the Question of 'Uses'.

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In Summer 2000, *Nordicom Information* published an article by me entitled 'Towards the Really Useful Media Researcher? (Corner, 2000). In that piece I set out what I thought were some problems, both established and emerging, around the 'uses' of media research, placing these within the broader context of changing ideas about research and its employment both within and outside the academy. The title was designed to strike an ironic note, particularly with its question mark, and it was essentially written up from what I hoped was a provocative talk given to the Swedish Association for Media and Communication Research earlier in the same year.

Here, I want to re-examine some of the ideas in that paper across the gap of twelve or so years separating it from present circumstances. Within that period, one of the key opportunities I have had for exchanging views on this theme, both formally and informally, has followed from my being a member of a group of researchers working on the European Science Foundation project 'Changing Media/Changing Europe', which ran from 2000 to 2005. My 'team leader' on that large project (divided into separate thematic groupings) was Jostein Gripsrud, and the question of research values and applications in shifting contexts of funding came up regularly in our symposia , extending into our private conversations.

It seems to me that some of what I identified as at issue in that 2000 paper remains so today, but that there has also been significant change. Of course, my main marker will be the situation in the United Kingdom but I hope what I say will have a wider application. It would be tiresome to shadow the original commentary too

closely but there are two things in it that I want to pick up and develop straight away. The first is the location of the ‘uses’ question in the context of the wider setting of what I termed ‘the academic knowledge economy’. The second is some identification of the different types of use and user that can be considered relevant when planning, undertaking or publicising a piece of media research. I then want to examine some questions about how use-value might relate to the different areas of media research and finally to make some points about how the present concern in the UK about the activities of News International newspapers (including phone-hacking and surveillance by the *News of the World*) presents opportunities, but also challenges, to those in media research wishing to have the fruits of their inquiry taken greater account of in the making of public policy and the reform of media practice.

The Knowledge Economy and User Groups.

The academic knowledge economy is a distinctive subset of that broader range of corporate, professional and public knowledge that is produced with modern societies and which shows various patterns of accessibility and circulation, some of it being tightly restricted (and perhaps highly priced), some of it being widely and freely disseminated. Academic knowledge quite often operates with what we can call a ‘licensed esotericism’, which bluntly speaking indicates that no one outside the relevant discipline can be expected to understand it let alone find any use for it. However, many areas also have what could be seen as a ‘translation responsibility’, that is to say a requirement that whatever is produced of significance within the disciplinary frame will, at least in part, be ‘translated’ so that it can inform more general public, corporate or professional action. Medical research, Legal Studies,

Civil Engineering and Sociology, for example, may have this requirement placed upon them in different ways according to the particular lines of research pursued (and perhaps the sources of funding for it). Some disciplines have a relatively low 'translation requirement' placed upon them. For instance, it is not generally expected that developments in philosophy will have wide interest outside of their specialist sphere nor is it expected that work in literary studies (say, a study of sexual metaphors in 18<sup>th</sup> century verse) will much engage the interest of those beyond the academic profession.

Media Research, considered as a discrete zone of academic endeavour (which it is quite frequently *not*, since a range of cross-disciplinary developments and interests in matters to do with the media continue to complicate its profile, its 'borders' and what might be taken as its core ideas) is rather uncertainly placed in relation to the 'translation requirement'. A very great deal of it inclines more towards esoteric independence, the concepts and arguments and analysis developed in ever more specialist and sub-specialist journals having little connection with the wider world of practice, including media practice. However, with national variations, some of it does show a serious desire, perhaps built-in right from the start of inquiries, to connect outwards and have some kind of 'input', however minor, into the ways in which the media work. The desire extends to policy, management, professional practice, social impact and perhaps the broader terms of public engagement. In some academic institutions, such a desire is related in part to the fact that the teaching of media and communications involves, to varying degrees, the training of students in journalism and media production skills.<sup>1</sup> Thus pedagogy attempts (with varying degrees of goodwill and success, it must be said) to combine both academic and professional frameworks at the level of the curriculum. It is worth noting another,

obvious, dimension of the relations between research and use. With few exceptions, research with a theoretical orientation will be seen to have less non-academic application than research with an empirical weighting. Users are looking more for data than for ideas (although it is possible to underestimate the extent to which some external bodies are seeking a fresh input of thinking as well as of ‘findings’). To this extent, a detailed comparative survey of how fans between the ages of 17 and 22 get cross-media information about their favourite sport will be of considerably more interest than a critical re-reading of Horkheimer on the question of instrumental reason.

I want to come back later in this note to the question of the academic knowledge economy and the re-framing which it has undergone as a result of broader shifts in the terms of public and corporate subsidy of the university sector. But one key question I addressed back in 2000 was – what are the different types of user of media research and how do they differ?

I identified four main categories – academic, corporate, governmental and public – and these still remain, albeit in shifted ways, the main points of reference.

Of the four categories, there is little doubt that ‘academic’ remains by far the largest user grouping, although researchers have become considerably more nervous about this situation and have variously attempted to modify it (or disguise it). The sheer scale and intensity of research productivity within the modern academy, the number of articles published and papers given, quite apart from the specialist nature of the language employed to address research questions, means that ‘internal’ use will in most cases far exceed any ‘external’ take-up. This is even true of much work in engineering, medicine or law, where the connection of research with professional practice might be thought to be direct and extensive. The main use of a majority of

media research (whether consciously intended so or not) is, then, to contribute to academic understanding of the media and to stimulate further academic research which will, in turn, be largely of use to media researchers. In a situation defined by a growing utilitarianism around academic value in general, it is not surprising that open defence of ‘academic use only’ has become rarer. However, it is my view, shared by many others, than academic senior managers and the representatives of the sector in the UK have accepted the imposed governmental definitions of ‘use’ far too readily and have not made the case for intrinsic academic value with quite the imagination and effort that could have been shown. But I also recognise some of the difficulties involved in making such a case as well as some of the arguments against taking up too strong an ‘academicist’ position in relation to uses, and later in this note I want to say more about both.

There are clear indications that what was a situation of *relative* stability within the research realm twenty years ago (even though funding was becoming more competitive) has come under increasing strain as public subsidy of academic activities other than teaching (itself subject to more specific ‘efficiency’ criteria) is both further limited and the focus of intensive forms of accountability. In the UK, one sign of this changed climate is the ‘impact factor’ now introduced as part of the national Research Excellence Framework. University departments have to show, selectively, how a part of the research they have undertaken has contributed to the activities of ‘non-academic’ users. This measure, undertaken within the framework of neo-liberal restructuring, has attempted to ‘break into’ what might be seen as the closed-circuit of the academic knowledge economy at the level of audits, leading to punishment or reward.

Alongside the academic, three other types of user have always featured in media research, but now they have become more attractive in the context of the changed priorities introduced by the government. First of all, we can identify *corporate* use, although a number of departments have been ethically uneasy about the precise kinds of work that should be undertaken on behalf of commercial media operations and the way in which this work might align or conflict with a research agenda independently conceived, one which contributes ‘to the field’ in a way that might advance the researchers’ reputations. Nevertheless, it is highly likely that more arrangements of this kind will emerge. Secondly, there are various types of *government* user, including in the UK those parts of national and regional government concerned with media regulation as well as the many bodies involved in information systems and publicity and those needing intelligence concerning the media’s impact upon their own field of management (e.g. health, housing, education). Again, some wariness about the degree of involvement with government agendas has been shown by media research institutions. However, perhaps a bigger problem has been the perceived lack of serious (as opposed to ‘polite’) interest that government has shown in the products of academic inquiry into the media, with notable exceptions around issues involving ‘harm’ which, if only intermittently, become the cause of public disquiet.<sup>2</sup> Thirdly, there are *public* users. Some users collected under this heading might be immediately specifiable, for instance the public service broadcasting organisations and various public (but not governmental) bodies. Other users in this category are less tightly identified, with various kinds of grouping perhaps being sent copies of research material or given presentations from it at public meetings, in both cases suitably ‘translated’ for accessibility. ‘Use’ here is highly speculative - a ‘trickle down’ effect from core research might work to inform broader public attitudes (for

instance, on the distorted nature of dominant media portrayals of immigration) but such a consequence is a hope much more than it is a prediction. This is so even if sections of the media themselves become involved in relaying versions of the research, massively increasing the scale and potential impact at the same time as bringing risks of wilful or simply ‘routine’ distortion<sup>3</sup>. It is worth noting here, of course, that the identification of user groups, even ones who have contributed to the funding of research and who display enthusiasm for the results, does not directly align with actual, *practical employment* in the formation of policy or the modification of practice. There are always likely to be many more designated ‘users’ than specific instances of actual ‘use’. Like so many other academic areas, media research is regularly at risk of deluding itself as to just how far its ostensible ‘user profile’ is an indication of a substantive input into real-world activity. As the audit of ‘non-academic’ use intensifies within the academy, it is encouraged to turn this delusion into a strategy for survival, claiming the maximum *potential* ‘use’ that it can.

#### The Variety of Media Research and the Profile of Uses.

The sheer variety of media research, thematically, theoretically and methodologically, is an obvious factor in attempting to profile the kind of user take-up it receives. And here I think it is helpful to bring in another distinction I made in the earlier article, that between ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ use. The distinction is only indicative but it seems clear that while some external users relate to research output quite comprehensively (perhaps as a consequence of their being contributors to primary funding, exerting an influence over basic design), other users take it up only partially and selectively, in a way which is not governed by any official, professional channels and which might

more correctly be called 'interest' rather than 'use'. I could take an example from my own work. My 1990's study *The Art of Record* (Corner, 1996) was designed to refresh the study of documentary by taking selected documentary films from different periods and giving them detailed close analysis in a way which supported historical and discursive comparisons and contrasts. This was not an entirely original approach but it contrasted with a dominant tendency to write about documentary issues at a level of sustained abstraction, only offering short illustrations to ground the argument. One unexpected result of my way of coming at the topic, designed primarily for an academic readership, was that quite a few people working on documentary inside the television industry read the book and some parts of it got taken up within professional discussion and within training. This was 'indirect' use of an unplanned kind but I found it a very rewarding form of attention to have. Interestingly, one part of its success in this respect followed from my interest in appreciating the positive achievements of much documentary work, keeping controls on the theoretical density of the material and using a language as clear and direct as possible, without in the process unduly reducing the complexity of the questions it addressed. Although the book was generally well received academically, to some researchers in Film Studies this made the book less interesting than a book more concerned with theoretical development and placing greater emphasis on critique (a book which I also felt myself well able to write had I chosen to). I mention this simply to underscore the way in which attracting outside 'users' may sometimes be achieved only by risking less appeal to established 'insiders' – a serious gamble, particularly at the formative stages of an academic career.

Of the many different approaches at work within modern media research, textual analysis of media forms is among the hardest to project as 'useful' outside of

the academic community. Studies of content with a strong quantitative framing may attract some attention, particularly if they are comparative in character, but very few people in the media industry have an interest in the detailed and often elaborate studies of media discourse which are still a major strand of media research internationally, variously drawing on linguistics and semiotics in relation to the full generic range of media output, embracing factual and fictional modes. One reason for this is clear and has been indicated earlier. Such studies mostly work with an intellectual agenda that has been developed almost entirely within academia and they often deploy a language that poses a huge obstacle even to those practitioners who have an inclination to read them. Another reason is that practitioners often feel that they 'already know' how media forms, including web forms, work, as a result of possessing the recipe knowledge that goes into their construction. A touch of arrogance is suspected in those who write about articles and programmes without having any experience at all of making them. It takes a lot of work to bridge this gap and one part of it would entail what I earlier called 'translated versions' of research material, where central points and key ideas and data are presented in ways which allow them be more easily understood and debated within contexts of use. Even then, success is by no means guaranteed. In my 2000 article, I pointed to the difficulties my colleagues and I experienced when working with economic journalists during the production of a study on the language and images of economic news on television in relation to public comprehension of economic affairs.<sup>4</sup> While the journalists were keen to address the issues emerging from our discussions with respondent groups, they tended to be quietly scornful about our attempts to analyse directly the different ways in which economic news was put together and performed and the different alternatives which might be given a try.<sup>5</sup>

Audience and readership research is another, longstanding and internally varied, strand of research internationally, but there is reason to believe that the shift to a more conceptualised and qualitative agenda and (justly) to a good deal more conditionality around the issue of 'influence' may have reduced the level of interest which it has for non-academic groupings. Again, language is part of the problem but so is the awkward divergence/convergence which forms of academic audience research have with developing forms of market research. While the former pursue inquiries related to sociological and cultural understanding in the quest to advance discipline-based knowledge in discipline-based publications, the latter, as a form of 'commercial intelligence', tailor such understanding tightly to strategic requirements. In part, they remove the need for a potentially messy engagement with the academy unless the academy offers itself directly (and sometimes this happens) as a 'cut-price' option to market research.

Work on production and on policy has often, perhaps more strongly than any other area of media research, sought to influence those outside the academy. It has generally worked with a more accessible conceptual framework and language of analysis than textual or audience studies and it has quite often made the presentation of findings to professional groups a key part of its dissemination strategy. Within the UK, a limiting factor here, one which may be slowly reducing in scale, is the relatively low status of 'media research' as an academic area when judged from the perspective of major national bodies. For a long time, departments of politics, economics, psychology and sociology doing work on aspects of the media (particularly those departments from the top universities) could assume a far greater level of interest from the governing and administrative elite than the product of work from media and communication studies centres. Even so, just as forms of market

research offer competition (as ‘useful’ accounts) to academic approaches to study of the audience, so ‘think tanks’, variously independent or supported by interest groups, present a challenge to the taking-up of what is produced even by the most elite policy researchers in the universities. Although there are major national variations here, this occurs because the policy sphere and the policy process concerning media affairs exist, in most countries, within a dense inter-elite space, operating as much at informal as at formal levels and proving a challenging area in which to get a serious hearing for academic work. More so than elsewhere, polite responses to dispatched material, the taking up of invitations to speak, the invitation for academics to sit on ‘advisory’ committees, can disguise the often very limited extent to which research materials and arguments actually ‘get through’ to the key decision makers, let alone are included in the resources finally used to inform policy-making action.

#### Working within the Limits.

It is clear from the above that a challenge is posed for academic media research that seeks to be taken seriously outside of the academy. One factor in this challenge is the way in which, despite increasing official encouragement to be ‘useful’, the established protocols of academic publication, reputation and promotion still favour work which has a strong positioning within the academic field and its constituent theories, concepts, methods and agendas. This does not always fit well with accessibility and an orientation to the requirements of practice. Secondly, and related to this, there is good evidence that many of those charged with media policy-making and with professional media activities do not feel that they are missing much by paying only scant attention, at best, to the output of academic researchers. There is often a sociable

response to calls for more ‘dialogue’ and more ‘exchange’ but this frequently has difficulty progressing beyond the superficial. A third factor which I noted, again a related one, is the existence of many other powerful groups, including market research organisations, think-tanks and assorted lobbyists, seeking to influence shifts in policy and practice and generally adopting strategies aligned more directly with perceived needs within the non-academic world.

It might be thought that the wish to have an impact on general public attitudes concerning the media, to act as a resource for critical democracy and accountability at the level of the ordinary citizen, escapes many of these limitations. In certain respects it does so, although the problem of accessibility and of finding suitable means of dissemination, going beyond the organisation of public meetings and at the same time avoiding media distortion, remains pertinent. Moreover, some attempts to inform public understanding of the media have shown a vulnerability to another hazard – that of overestimating the extent of public disquiet and discontent about media operations and the level of existing support for structural reform. In seeking to give sharper focus and additional knowledge to public perceptions of media activities, it is clearly important to make strong connections with present assumptions and judgements. Too explicitly ‘critical’ or ‘radical’ an approach to issues such as class inequality in television portrayals, the unbalanced coverage of economic crises, the mix of ‘public’ and ‘private’ funding for news services or the need for shifts in recruitment and training can, rather than acting as a bridge, work to open up even further a disabling gap between academic and ‘lay’ positions about what is wrong and how it can be put right.<sup>6</sup> This is in some contrast to academic presentation, where such normative positions of vigorous critique and of open hostility are often an expectation.

This is an interesting time to ponder such questions in the UK because there is currently a strong move towards gaining greater visibility for academic media research ideas in addressing the questions of media regulation which follow from the News International Scandal of 2011 concerning phone-hacking, a scandal involving the Murdoch-owned Sunday newspaper *News of the World* to such an extent it was closed by its owners. Among other things, this episode indicated the failure of ‘self-regulation’ (always the preferred option within the media industry, of course) and also the failure of existing bodies charged with press oversight, notably the Press Complaints Commission. These circumstances have produced a promising conjuncture within which elite receptivity to views from the media research community might be seen, at least for the time being, to be unusually strong. In response to this, there was set up in Autumn 2011, with considerable input by media academics, A ‘Campaign for Media Reform’, ([www.mediareform.org](http://www.mediareform.org)) which has the following two stated objectives:

1. *To co-ordinate the most effective contribution by NGOs, academics and media campaigners to the Leveson Inquiry [into phone-hacking] and the Communications Review [the UK Government’s policy review of the entire sector].*
2. *To stimulate research and campaign activities that focus on advocating policies to sustain the public interest and to develop a democratic media system.*

*These aims will be pursued through the circulation of papers, the holding of events and eventually a ‘a media summit’ where it is hoped a wide range of perspectives (some previously excluded from elite deliberations) will be offered, together with the outcomes of detailed analysis.*

The level of success of this initiative will, among things, be an important indicator of just how far an academic contribution can impact upon national media policy.

Alongside the overcoming of the obstacles to success which I have noted above, there is another routine limitation that will need attention – that is the tendency for academic contributions to be move rather awkwardly between micro, mezzo and macro levels. At the micro level, the issue and the possibilities for change are addressed primarily within the terms of immediate local conditions, the mezzo extends this further to surrounding political social and economic factors and the macro extends further still, finally to encompass the entire political, social and economic system. What is taken as a ‘given’ in any proffered solution and what is seen as itself requiring change are inevitably important variables in discussion of policy reform. Too rapid a shift to the ‘macro’ level of the kind that has regularly appears in academic argument (‘journalism will not change until the economic basis of the industry itself changes’) will clearly risk weakening contributions as practical proposals for reform. That said, however, there is good reason to believe that the initiatives currently being pursued have a chance of pursuing the ‘optimum’ path of recommending lines of significant, extensive but ‘practical’ change and at the same time identifying a background of structural deficits requiring longer-term attention. If they do this successfully, they will break through that relative isolation of media research from media policy which has been the longstanding situation in the UK.

The broader issue which lies underneath much of the situation I have described is that of the decisions, at subject field, department and individual level, as to what extent

specific research projects into the media should be designed and undertaken with non-academic as well as academic uses in mind, and (related to this) the extent to which there should be ‘translations’ of findings and arguments for a broader, non-academic readership and attempts made to address this readership. The dangers of conceding too much to an externally imposed utilitarianism are clear, bringing a reduction in intellectual and critical vigour. But the risks of academic isolationism are also present. The narrower threat here (appearing to be out of line with the shifting terms of the funding regime) is far less significant than the broader one, of failing to engage, across all the difficulties and contradictions presented, with the public responsibilities of the intellectual work of the academy, viewed as a mode of public sphere activity. The specialist esotericism of university research culture connects at its core with important principles of academic freedom and I have noted above how the idea of ‘academic use only’ needs to be something about which academic researchers can be confident rather than nervous. However, the steady, ‘industrialised’ growth of academic research, while it has provided a basis for outstanding achievements, has also produced a strand of conservative, inward-looking professionalisation, sometimes positioning researchers as rather too snug within their field-oriented protocols and orders of significance. Among other things, we need good exemplars of *engagement* to discourage any further tendencies towards a research culture too comfortable with habits of *seclusion* and to take up the many challenges, both of intellectual design and social connection, I have discussed above. There is no doubt that the person to whose achievements these collected essays are offered in celebration provides an inspiring point of reference here. Jostein Gripsrud has a firm place among those academics I have known, internationally, who have regularly attempted to locate research in broader settings than the monograph, journal and seminar and to participate in a more

expansive dialogue with policy-makers, media professionals and public bodies. They have often done so with great success, enriching their own more directly ‘academic’ agenda and that of their colleagues in the process. This has not meant subordination to the requirements of others, or any diminution of intellectual depth. Insofar as media research wants to be more than a ‘private conversation’ between specialists (however stimulating this can be), it needs to address the issue of ‘uses’ and ‘users’ with a little more honest directness about quite what it wants to find out and why. It also needs to be more imaginative in exploring new opportunities for usefulness of its own devising, not simply to respond, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, to the initiatives (and prejudices) of others.

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<sup>1</sup> The widely used category ‘journalism studies’ is interesting in this respect, suggesting a linking of the academic and the professional. However, at the level of research, strong divergence is at least as noticeable as any shared agenda.

<sup>2</sup> Issues around ‘violence’ remain prominent here, but the web has ushered in a whole range of potential ‘threats’ which have been explored for official policy purposes using the resources of the academy.

<sup>3</sup> Many media researchers will know of the play-off between the gains of dissemination and the losses of distortion which accompanies the media’s taking up of stories about their own ‘influences and effects’. In some cases, the results can easily seem to belie the old adage that ‘no publicity is bad publicity’.

<sup>4</sup> The research was published as a book (Gavin, 1998) to which four journalists contributed short notes of comment.

<sup>5</sup> That said, more could be done to bring professionals into projects of formal analysis, partly by finding out more about the problems which *they* identify in existing uses of language and image and the vocabulary they use in doing so.

<sup>6</sup> This brings up the issue of the ‘media centric’ character of some research. That is to say, its tendency to assume the media’s centrality to a range of broad political and social issues not just to its own focus of study, thereby perhaps displacing or ignoring non-media factors in drawing its conclusions. When considered alongside that longstanding failure to recognise the media’s significance which still continues in parts of political studies and even in public policy formation, this might be seen as a counter-balance, but it brings with it clear risks of exaggeration which can impair the use of the products of inquiry outside of academic circles.

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